

Praying Goodbye
Phil. 1:3-11
Oct. 25, 2009
Kory Wilcoxson

I want to tell you about July 3, 2001. It was a Tuesday and it was my third day on the job as associate minister at Community Christian Church. I had been ordained about two months before and was so new to the ministry I still had tags on me and that fresh new minister smell. I had survived my first Sunday in the pulpit without getting booed out of the sanctuary, so I thought I was off to a pretty good start. I was ready for anything!

Except for the phone call I was about to receive. Nelson Irving, the senior pastor, was out of the office, probably playing pool at Ken Fisher's house, so after only three days on the job, I was left in charge. Big mistake. The phone rings, and I answer it in my most professional minister voice: "Community Christian Church, this is Kory." The voice on the other end was almost hysterical. Apparently, this lady's teenage son was creating all kinds of havoc in their household and she was at the end of her rope. She ranted and raved for about ten straight minutes, spewing forth this stream of frustration and angst that was melting the phone in my hands. When she finally paused to take a breath, she says in the most exasperated tone, "So...what should I do?"

Umm. They didn't train me for this in seminary. I never took a class on handling irate parishioners. So I summoned up my most pastoral voice and said, as I was taught to say in my Introduction to Pastoral Counseling class, "Well, that's a tough situation. I really feel for you. I wish I had an easy answer you, but I don't." Then I smiled, and said to myself, "Ooo, good empathizing! That's just the soothing balm this lady needs. This ministry stuff is easy!" And there was a pause on the other end of the line for about three seconds, then I heard this intake of breath and a voice almost scream, "Well, that's just not good enough!"

You can imagine how I felt at that moment. Here I had invested four years of time, money and effort into earning a Master of Divinity degree, sacrificed time with my wife and little daughter, slogged out systematic theology papers, moved to Illinois, and after three days on the job I was already a failure. How ironic that Jesus rose on the third day and I was crucified on it. "That's just not good enough!"

Well, eight years later, I'm happy to say that parishioner and I have a wonderful relationship, and while I didn't fix her teenage son, I hope I provided some sort of comfort to her and her family along the way. In fact, I had lunch with her recently and we laughed about that first phone call. I tell that story because as I reflect on my time here, I realize that ever since that day I've been doing my best to be "good enough" as your minister. I have been my own hardest critic and toughest boss, trying to live up to my calling as a Christian minister and servant of a congregation, and live up to my own expectations to be "good enough."

And I've failed. I haven't been good enough. Now, you may want to disagree with me and I appreciate that sentiment, or you may want to agree with me, in which case I appreciate you remaining quiet. But the truth of the matter is that, when I look at who I was called to be, I wasn't good enough. In fact, none of us are. No matter how exemplary our lives, no matter how selfless or generous or compassionate we are, we can never measure up to the standards that are set for us. At some point, whether it is three days or three years or thirty years, we will fall short.

But through our faith in Christ, that all changes. Through our belief in Jesus as our savior, we go from being "not good enough" to being "good enough." We may not always live up to this

description, but the forgiveness and mercy we are offered at the Communion Table is one of the ways God looks at us and says, “You are good enough.”

I want to say to you that you are good enough, as individuals and as a congregation. We’ve had our ups and downs together, our successes and our failures, our times of great faith and times of great doubt, but in the end, I can say with confidence that you are good enough. Not because of anything you have done, but because of what I’ve seen God do through you.

And I can say that because I’ve heard your story. Over these past eight years, I’ve had the honor of listening to your story and being a part of it. I’ve been invited into your homes, I’ve sat across lunch tables with you, I’ve talked with you on the phone, and I’ve exchanged emails with you. And all the while, I’ve been listening to your story.

But it goes deeper than just casual conversations, doesn’t it? We’ve sat together in the hospital waiting room or the funeral parlor. We’ve sat in my office and cried and laughed and worried and prayed. We’ve talked together in Friendship Hall after worship or in the parking lot after a meeting. We’ve worked side by side on mission trips. We’ve witnessed weddings and baby dedications. I’ve had the honor of hearing your story.

And what an amazing story it is! It’s a story of hope, of perseverance, of answered prayer, of faith in the midst of unanswered prayer, of living out what we believe by helping others. I’ve heard you tell it during our Thanksgiving service, or on Lay Sunday, or during the sharing of joys and concerns before our prayer. Your story is inspiring and moving and an incredible testimony to the work of God in this world.

So I want to encourage you today to keep telling that story. Author Diana Butler Bass says, “We become ourselves as well tell our stories.” You will continue to become whatever God is calling you to be as you put words to how you experience God in your life. You don’t have to tell it eloquently or dramatically or use big words like “penultimate” and “soteriology” (although if you do it makes it even better). Just tell your story.

You see those doors? There will be people coming through those doors who don’t know your story, including your next minister. And they need to hear it, because not only is it your story, not only is it this church’s story, it’s God’s story. And when you articulate it, when you speak it out loud, when you give voice to it, you become who God created you to be. You have an awesome story and I have been honored to be a part of it these last eight years. And I when I tell my story, you will have a special place in it.

And now, this chapter comes to an end. I have had several people say, “I’m not going to say ‘goodbye’ because that just sounds so final.” Yes, it does and yes, it is. But not when you consider what it really means. The word “goodbye” is a contracted form of the phrase, “God be with ye.” To say “goodbye” is to entrust someone to God’s care once they are no longer in your presence.

Other languages pick up on this. In Spanish, the word for God is “Dios,” so their parting word, “Adios,” literally means, “to God.” Same with the French word “Adieu.” To God. And the German “auf Wiedersehen” literally means...actually, I don’t know what that means. But you get the idea.

In the Christian vocabulary, there’s a word that carries with it some of the same meanings. It’s a word we use a lot when we pray: Amen. Amen means “right on” or “let it be so” or, as they say where I’m going in Kentucky, “Yup!” It’s the exclamation point at the end of sentence that affirms the truth of what’s been said and commends it to God.

You probably have never noticed that I don’t end my sermons with an “amen” as a lot of pastors do. My preaching professor in seminary encouraged us to not do this, because he believes

the sermon should only be the beginning of the conversation, not the end of it. “Don’t put a period where God wants to put a comma.” In other words, ending a sermon with “amen” is like saying, “And that’s all there is to say about that.” I don’t believe that’s true, so I have never said “amen” at the end of a sermon.

But this sermon is a little different, because in some ways it IS the end of the conversation, at the least one between you and me. We are putting the punctuation on the end of the sentence at the end of the paragraph at the end of the chapter, a chapter that I humbly pray was “good enough.” It feels like there’s still so much more to be done and so much we have left undone, but we’ll just have to turn that over to God and trust that the dialogue will be picked up by your next conversation partner. I can’t wait to hear what stories are written in your future. And until that happens, I am able to say with confidence, trust, love and faith, goodbye and amen.